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**MEDIA RELEASE**

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WILL THERE BE WOLVES IN MONTANA?

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MISSOULA--

When someone in Montana cries "Wolf!" University of Montana scientist Robert R. Ream wants to know about it because there are only a few wolves left in the state.

Since 1972, Ream has collected more than 400 reports of possible wolf sightings or signs in Montana, northern Idaho and northwestern Wyoming, and he said he hopes to get more.

Ream, a UM associate professor of forestry and the director of forestry and the director of the UM Wilderness Institute, directs the UM Wolf Ecology Project (WEP), which has been funded by contracts from the Office of Endangered Species of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service since 1978.

The objectives of the project are to determine the present distribution and population levels of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf and to identify its environmental needs.

Ream said that he left Minnesota in 1969, where he had studied wolves, and came to the University of Montana, where he was told that the howling of wild wolves was no longer heard in the state.

He found, however, there were occasional reports and he soon started the WEP, which began with a five-year inventory of the possible Montana wolf population through reports from ranchers, hunters, biologists and campers.

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In order to improve the quality of reported wolf sightings and signs, Ream and WEP research assistants published a wolf identification field guide and report forms for use by people who have opportunities to see the elusive canines. Signs of wolves include tracks, howling, dens, scat or kills.

The most reliable reports have been from areas along the east slopes of the Rocky Mountains in Montana and several mountain valleys straddling the Continental Divide in the northwestern and southwestern corners of the state. Ream also has extended research activities into adjacent mountainous southern Alberta and British Columbia.

Ream said he had hoped that there would be remnants of native wolf packs in Montana wilderness areas like Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness -- but his research to date has not yielded any evidence of pack populations and he has concluded that no Montana packs exist.

Wolves had been systematically eradicated from most of the United States and Canada from the late 1800s through the 1950s because of their menace to livestock and ability to spread rabies. Since then, wolf packs have been steadily increasing in Alberta and British Columbia, where some hunting of wolves is allowed.

Based on data he has gathered, Ream theorizes that native Montana wolf packs probably have been wiped out and that the occasional sightings in the state, usually of a lone wolf, are the last remnants of former Montana packs or, more likely, "dispersers" from the Canadian populations.

Since 1978 Ream and his assistants, who are usually UM students, have tried to trap wolves in Montana to attach radio-location collars in order to study their behavior. In March 1979, after three months of work, they caught an 80-pound female wolf in the North Fork of the Flathead River valley, just south of the U.S.-Canadian border, collared her and tracked her activities until recently when her collar stopped transmitting.

They learned that although the wolf was apparently fertile and had a wide range

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extending along most of the river drainage, she had no mates and produced no litters. They kept close records of her movements, activities, feeding behavior and prey, which usually consisted of elk, deer, moose, beaver and small rodents and birds.

Although it was already known by the researchers, their experience with the collared wolf confirmed the difficulty in identifying wolves by sight or sign. For example, Ream said, wolf tracks can be easily confused with large dog or coyote tracks, and the scat of wolves, mountain lions and coyotes are very similar. Also, when briefly sighted, the long-legged wolves can be mistaken for deer, large dogs or mountain lions.

Despite the stiff penalties for illegally killing wolves in the United States-- fines amounting to $10,000 to $20,000-- at least four wolves have been killed in Montana in the last six years.

"Wolves were a part of our natural environment at one time," Ream said, "and I would like to see them again in areas where we are trying to bring back the natural wilderness conditions, since the wolf was part of those conditions."

Ream said that he realizes that the re-establishment of wolves probably will not be welcomed by some people, especially livestock owners.

"We need a careful management plan and strategy to start with," Ream stated. "There will be problems with livestock and wolves, so we need a plan in advance to handle any wolves that become problems, like trapping by authorities.

"We'll never get to a stage where wolves are overrunning the state," Ream remarked, "so they won't be destroying game herds either." He estimated that the optimum wolf populations in the planned-for areas of Montana would be one wolf per 20 to 50 square miles of wilderness. At that level, he said, wolves would not be burdensome on game populations and could provide sufficient natural predation.

He added that there has never been a documented case of wolves attacking people in the United States, so campers in wilderness areas would have nothing to fear from old myths or wolves howling at the moon.

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Ream said the wolf populations could increase in northwestern Montana through natural migration from the western Canadian provinces. He explained that if a mating pair of male and female dispersers were to become safely established in Montana, a wolf pack would soon ensue, resulting in further dispersal and population.

To learn more about the migration of Canadian wolves into Montana and about dispersers Ream said that he will work more with Canadian researchers and officials.

He explained that the corridor consisting of a relatively undeveloped wilderness along the Continental Divide of the Rocky Mountains in southern Alberta and British Columbia would provide a natural avenue for wolf migration if the animals were allowed to move safely.

Ream said that the wilderness along the Rocky Mountain front in Montana has much potential for wolf pack sights. However, he cautioned that new complications have arisen in the area because of energy development activities and plans.

He explained that development itself presents few problems for the wolves, although the people required to develop the areas will increase possible conflicts between wolves and man.

"I don't think oil company employees with guns in their trucks are going to be good for wolves," Ream said, "unless they fully understand and appreciate the wolf as an endangered species."

One of the largest efforts toward wolf recovery in Montana will be public education, Ream noted. His research should provide much of the information for education programs when the time arrives, he said. But he already has given talks in Montana communities about wolves and his projects and, he said, he has been well received.

Ream said that he uses information and examples from his wolf studies in classes he teaches at the University concerning legislation, management and recovery of endangered species. Often, UM students help him with the WEP as assistants who earn credit and

experience as training wildlife biologists.

The research of Ream and several of his assistants has been condensed into several reports written on the observations of the radio-collared wolf; historical and geographic perspectives on wolf populations, distribution and policies in Montana; the field guide, report forms and system for rating the reliability of reports; a comparative study of wolf and dog tracks; and a study of wolf food habits.

However, future funding for the project is in question, Ream said, because of federal budget cutbacks in the Office of Endangered Species. He has not received notification on the level of upcoming funding for the project, but he said he expects cuts in the program which would severely limit field research.

Even so, Ream has plans for the project for the next five years and looks forward to being able once again to hear wolf-howls in Montana wilderness.

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